



Walk

A world apart

Explore the glorious Gower at Rhossili

Time: 2 hours

Distance: 5 miles

Landscape: coastal

West of the city and industries of Swansea and Port Talbot lies a small peninsula home to some of the most beautiful scenery in Britain - the Gower.

In 1956 the Gower's stunning limestone coast and variety of different habitats, meant it was designated the UK's first ever Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

In just five miles, we'll experience some of these different landscapes – from golden beaches to windswept heaths, wave-carved bays to tiny, unspoilt farms and villages and find out why it has this special status.

Location:

Rhossili, Gower, Wales

Start and finish:

St Mary's Church, Rhossili, SA3 1PN

Grid reference:

SS 41668 88081

Keep an eye out for:

Whales and porpoises swimming around Worms Head

Thank you!



Chris Lindley and Gower AONB for providing photos and advice on the walk script.
For lots more information, including more walks and trails,
visit This is Gower at <http://www.thisisgower.co.uk>



Route and stopping points



- 01 St Mary's Church, Rhossili
- 02 Trig point, Rhossili Down
- 03 Heathland, Rhossili Down
- 04 Mewslade Bay
- 05 Coastguard lookout hut, Worm's Head
- 06 Wales Coast Path to Rhossili village

01 St Mary's Church, Rhossili

Except on a very cold day, you might not make an immediate connection between Rhossili and the Antarctic, but go inside this church and see if you can spot a blue and white stained glass window showing a glacier with figures on top. This window and the nearby plaque are a memorial to local-born Edgar Evans who died on Captain Scott's ill-fated expedition of 1910-1913.

The church stands at the start of the footpath up the south side of Rhossili Down – the highest of the sandstone ridges which rise across the Gower peninsula. Glorious views are a feature of this walk, so let's begin!

Directions

Leave the church car park and turn left. Go down the track and make for steps leading uphill ahead. Go through gate labelled Rhossili Down. Go up steps in the hill ahead to a flattish area with great views. Walk between gorse bushes to the top of the hill heading for the white trig point.

02 Trig point, Rhossili Down

We've only climbed a short distance, but from here we have a wonderful 360-degree view across the whole of the Gower AONB.

You can start to see why this unspoilt thumb of land jutting out into the Bristol Channel is unique. For a relatively small area (approx 70 square miles), Gower boasts a huge variety of different landscapes and habitats. Described as 'a happy accident of geological forces, climactic conditions and human enterprise', Gower is indeed a country of contrasts.

First, take in the 3-mile stretch of pristine, golden sands that make up Rhossili Beach. On the landward side, you can see an impressive network of sand dunes created from 500-year-old storms. At either end of the beach are two tidal islands: Worms Head and Burry Holms. Attached to the mainland by a slim umbilical cord, they are cut off by the tide twice a day and pose a risk (and challenge) to would-be adventurers.

Looking inland from Worms Head, see if you can spot a patchwork of arable fields. This area, known as The Vile, is one of the few places in Britain where the medieval strip field system is still practiced.

The land is divided into long, thin strips which are divided by earthbanks and dry stone walls. This system was a way of sharing out the land equally between villagers so they could share out the good and poor quality soils. Today, the land is still rented out to local farmers. Like in many parts of Britain, the harsh economic realities of farming means it is sadly in decline, but here, farming is essential for maintaining the character of the AONB.

In contrast, the high sandstone ridge of Rhossili Down that we're standing on offers a completely different landscape to the beach below. From our vantage point, we can see Gower's other high ridges of land including Hardings Down and Llanmadoc Hill. Beyond Llanmadoc Hill on Gower's north coast are miles of salt marsh and dunes grazed by cattle and wild ponies.

Below us, the flat apron of land above the beach with a lone white house is known as the Warren. The original village of Rhossili was once located here, but is long deserted and now buried under layers of sand. It's said that the bells of the village church can sometimes be heard ringing...

The poet Dylan Thomas, who was born in nearby Swansea and spent much of his youth on the Gower peninsula, almost bought the lone white house we can see. He decided against it, as there was no pub in the village!

Directions

Retrace your steps for a short distance then take a path bearing left across the heathland (East South East direction).

03 Heathland, Rhossili Down

We're now walking across Rhossili Down. In contrast to the patchwork of neatly hedged fields we can see ahead, this scrubland might seem a bare and unproductive landscape. But this is a rare heathland habitat.

The thin soils on this rocky, sandstone ridge don't allow for much vertical growth. Yet look around for low-lying shrubs and plants including gorse, heather and bracken. If you're lucky enough to be here in September, the Gower peninsula is a riot of red and purple as the heather comes into bloom.

Heaths are also home to rare insects, including the black bog ant and damselfly. You'll probably see (and hear) skylarks rising from the heather and perhaps a brown hare turning tail at your approach.

The wild horses that roam the heath add interest to our view, but they also play an important role in maintaining this habitat. By nibbling the encroaching scrub and bracken they keep it from taking over.

In just 200 years, the UK has lost 85 per cent of its heathland through building, forest plantations and neglect, making these Gower habitats even more significant.

Directions

Keep following the broad track downhill across the heath in a south east direction, following the blue arrows towards a house. Follow the path as it bends around the house and meets the road.

After a short distance cross a stile behind a Gower Way marker. Follow the yellow arrows then cross a stile and turn right down a track through the village of Pitton. Follow this to the main road.

Cross the road and follow the lane to Mewslade Beach car park. Follow the footpath sign between two sheds down to Mewslade Bay. After a wooded area, go through a wooden gate near a National Trust sign to reach the bay.

04 Mewslade Bay

Unlike Rhossili Beach, Mewslade Bay is much more remote and unpopulated. The nearest car park is over half a mile away and the path descends through a narrowly cut valley. Enjoy the isolation, the drama of the setting and the crashing waves hitting the shore.

Besides enjoying the peace and solitude of this strange secret beach, we can read the history of the landscape by studying the rocks around us. Facing the sea, on one side of you, the bay is protected by a great limestone headland, Thurba Head, which acts as a bastion defending the beach against the power of the waves.

Mewslade has a strange sense of other-worldliness. It looks a little like a set from Star Trek or how we might imagine the surface of another planet. That's chiefly down to the strange shapes made by the rocks.

At the lowest level are smooth potholes in the rocks. They have been created by the swirl of the tides, as waves bring boulders up to the beach. Next, just above this level, we can see how the soluble limestone has been nibbled by sea spray and rain to create pits, meanders and pinnacles in the rock.

Moving up beyond the reach of the waves, see if you can spot orange coloured lichens growing. This zone is where small plants, like thrift, are able to colonise the rock surface. It's at this level that we can also see an irregular platform above the reach of the sea. This is a clue that sea levels were once much higher – this platform was once the original beach.

Look closely for clusters of round boulders and cobbles. They were left behind by the waves lapping at this higher shoreline. This feature is known as a 'raised beach' and you'll see many of them on the Gower coast.

Directions

Walk back the same way you came, up the narrow, rocky footpath. When you see a path going diagonally uphill on the left, take this and follow it along the Wales Coast Path, passing Fall Bay, until you reach the coastguard station at Worm's Head.

05 Coastguard lookout hut, Worm's Head

With our back to the lookout hut, the extraordinary-shaped rock jutting out into the Bristol Channel is known as Worm's Head. What does it look like to you?

It was named by Viking invaders from the Norse 'wurm' meaning 'dragon'. Look closely and you'll see that the rock does resemble a sleeping dragon with its back and head poking out of the water.

Worm's Head is a tidal island, so depending on the time of day it can be completely cut off from the mainland. It's possible to walk across to it, but it's quite a tough scramble in places. If you do want to visit Worm's Head **always** use the safe crossing times. You can check tide times with the lookout station.

Make sure that you don't get stuck on Worm's Head, unlike the famous poet Dylan Thomas who fell asleep on the island and was stranded until the tides changed. He later wrote about it: "I stayed on that Worm from dusk to midnight, sitting on that top grass, frightened to go further in because of the rats and because of things I am ashamed to be frightened of. Then the tips of the reef began to poke out of the water and, perilously, I climbed along them to the shore."

The flat causeway that tempts explorers also provides clues to why Worm's Head became a tidal island. Down on the rocky causeway, we can see small cracks or 'faults' in the rock filled with bands of white. The white stripes are a mineral called calcite. Calcite is easily eroded, so over time, the waves have eaten away at the softer rock, leaving this low apron of land as a natural causeway.

Directions

With the sea on your left, follow the Wales Coast Path back to Rhossili village. Stop when you reach a bumpy area of grass to the left of the path.

06 Wales Coast Path to Rhossili village

Walking back to the small village of Rhossili, we once again enjoy glorious views over the wide sweep of the beach and peninsula beyond. The bumpy area of grass to the left of the path is the remains of a fort dating back to around 700 BC.

From this elevated position, we can see why our warring ancestors might have chosen this promontory as a good spot to watch out for approaching enemies. You can probably make out the remains of the fort's raised bank, but it's thought that much of the earthworks were destroyed by later limestone quarrying. Limestone was quarried from this area then transported by boat to Exmoor in North Devon to convert the moorland to pasture.

Look at a map or investigate Gower further and you'll find a wealth of prehistoric, Bronze and Iron Age forts, burial chambers, standing stones and cairns. Gower's rich archaeological and built heritage, adds to its magnetism and allure.

As we return to Rhossili village, notice its size. There's little more than a hotel, café, gift shops and a few houses. As an AONB, Gower is protected from inappropriate development, and the small population centres that dot the peninsula are few and far between. Tourism is now Gower's most important industry.

Along with boosting the area's economy, however, increased visitor numbers raise issues of sustainability for such a small place. Tiny villages like Rhossili can be swamped with summer visitors, the narrow country lanes become clogged up with traffic while beaches and popular beauty spots become littered. Small businesses which thrive in summer, like surfing shops and campsites, can struggle in the winter months. Many of the houses have become holiday homes, leaving villages empty out of season.

Gower however, really is a year round place. Each season offers a different beauty, especially for those who discover it on foot.

Gower's protected status has helped it escape much development. As a result, it has become a magnet for visitors wishing to escape the clamour of modern life. The 'happy accident' of a stunning natural coastline and diverse habitats are both its strength and weakness on this 'rare patch of the earth's surface'.

Directions

From the village you can make your way back to the church where the walk began.

 **Walk complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**